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ABSTRACT

A summary review of facts, figures, and trends concerning family life in Canada reveals patterns of continuity and patterns of change. Generalizations about the average family no longer suffice (if ever they did) as the basis for government policies and programs, corporate personnel practices, and the organization and administration of schools. The interests of families differ, and these competing interests find their expression in the increasingly polarized and politicized debate between those who would change reality in order to fit prescriptive, normative, and moralistic definitions, and those who seek to change the legitimated definitions of family in order to better fit evolving realities of family relationships and responsibilities. The conclusion to be drawn from the portrait of family diversity is that no single or unitary family policy can adequately address the needs of Canada's families. While diversity is a central characteristic of contemporary family life, all families assume common tasks and responsibilities on behalf of their members and society as a whole. By identifying and emphasizing what families do, not what they look like, it is possible to uncover tha basis of a realistic definition of family that is useful for public policy development. Challenges of family matters and family change for policymakers are pointed out. (RH)

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CANADA'S FAMILIES TODAY
SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING FORMS AND PATTERNS
A panel presentation by
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A SYMPOSIUM ABOUT FAMILIES
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CANADA'S FAMILIES TODAY
SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING FORMS AND PATTERNS

A summary review of facts, figures and trends about family life reveals both patterns of continuity and patterns of change.[1] Marriage and family commitments continue to be, for a large majority, integral parts of the lives of Canadian men and women. Perhaps reflecting more our beliefs about ourselves than our actual behaviours, Canadians do, when asked by Decima or Gallup, declare that their families are central to their lives and are the most important elements in their satisfaction and happiness. We declare quite readily that our families are more important to us than our jobs, incomes, political commitments and religious convictions.

Today, marriage is often delayed and preceded by a temporary period of cohabitation. The idea of marriage still suggests to most a permanent commitment, but, divorce has become a common and largely accepted practice perceived to be not the cause of marriage breakdown but simply the formal acknowledgement that a relationship has already ended. Marriage does not, as perhaps it once did, necessarily imply a willingness or desire to bear and raise children. There have been notable increases in rates of cohabitation and intentional childlessness. The most frequent consequence of divorce is remarriage.

A very large minority of children will experience life in a one-parent family, most often a female-headed family, during their childhood or youth. And, a majority of these children will later experience life with a step-parent. From an all-time low of 8.2%, the proportion of families led by a single parent had returned to approximately 13% by 1986.

More often than not today, women simultaneously combine childrearing and employment. Reflecting the dramatic increase in the proportion of young women with children active in the labour force is the fact that the most prevalent form of family today is the dual wage-earner family. The distribution of poverty among Canadians is related to their family circumstances including their marital status, number of children and number of wage-earners and the largest group of poor Canadians today is children. Despite the dramatic increase in the number of families who now rely on the earnings of two wage-earners, the median family income calculated in constant dollars has not increased since 1979. Average family incomes have been maintained only by virtue of the emergence of the two wage-earner family as the statistical norm and, as such, the situation of those families who, for whatever reasons, rely on one wage earner or no wage earner has deteriorated in relative terms. [2]

It is obvious to all that children increasingly receive care from adults other than their parents and this is true for 1/3 of the children whose mothers are not in the labour force as well as for those whose mothers are employed.

Canada's population is aging because adults, on average, now choose to bear fewer children than previous generations and no longer bear enough to replace themselves. Immigration is likely to play a more important role in the coming decades than in the past and the multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic character of Canada will become more pronounced. There is no epidemic of adolescent pregnancy with rates of both pregnancy and childbearing having declined in recent years among this age group. There has, indeed, been an increase in the number of children born outside of marriage such that 16.7% of all live births were to women who were not married at the time of the birth, but, these increases reflect most the fertility of women between the ages of 20 and 30 who, although unmarried, may or may not be living in a stable relationship of cohabitation.

These facts and figures serve to document the diversity of contemporary family life, a diversity of both form and of functional patterns. Generalizations about the "average" family no longer suffice, if ever they did, as the basis for government policies and programs, corporate personnel practices, the organization and administration of schools and education and so on.

The fact is that policies and programs will affect different families differently. The facts and figures just presented illustrate how families differ from one another by virtue of: their heritages of ethnic, cultural, racial and linguistic traditions; their socio-economic status and the ways in which they divide responsibilities to ensure economic survival; the ages, sexes and capacities of their members; and by the characteristics of the communities, locations and regions in which they live. [3]

By way of a concrete example, the availability of a range of accessible and affordable child care options may today be a necessity for the majority of families with young children but may be irrelevant to and, in fact, opposed as a costly indulgence by older families. Again, the needs of family members caring for aging parents may be a focus of government policy in years to come but may be little appreciated by those families who struggle with the needs and behaviours of their adolescent children. Educational and cultural programs intended to help preserve the distinct ethnic identities of minority populations may be valued as essential to the maintenance of family life as it is known by the beneficiaries of such programs, but, may be dismissed as superfluous and even "anti-family" by members of the majority. A

final example of how policies and programs affect different families differently is provided by the recent federal budget and its provision to implement the so-called "clawback" of family allowance benefits from so-called high-income earners on the basis of calculations of individual and not family incomes; the consequence of that decision is that a single wage-earning family earning around $55,000 per year will lose all of its family benefit while the dual wage-earning family earning a total of $99,000 per year with earnings equally split between the two wage earners will not be subject to the "clawback."

It is evident, then, that the interests of families differ and these competing interests do find their expression in the increasingly polarized and politicized debate between those who would change reality in order to fit prescriptive, normative and moralistic definitions and those who seek to change the legitimated definitions of family in order to better fit the evolving realities of family relationships and responsibilities.

The conclusion one draws from the portrait of family diversity is that no singular or unitary family policy can adequately address the needs of Canada's families. It is also apparent that such an approach to family policy matters would be politically unrealistic. On the contrary, the objective of family policy initiatives will be to bring coherence to a diverse range of flexible and open policies and programs oriented to the complex and multiple needs and circumstances of Canada's families.

Just as it is important to acknowledge that policies and programs may affect different families differently, it is also essential to appreciate how they may affect the different members of families differently. Policies and programs intended to serve the interests of a family may advance or jeopardize the interests of individuals. For example, the apparent stability of marriage might be increased by simply restricting divorce but such "stability" might well be at odds with the interests of an abused woman or child.

While diversity is a central characteristic of contemporary family life, all families do assume common tasks and responsibilities on behalf of their members and on behalf of the society as a whole. As Robert Rice has stated: "Function indicates social utility" [4] which reminds us that society depends at least as much upon families as families do upon society. By identifying and emphasizing what families do, in distinction from the less helpful but more common tendency to emphasize what families look like, it is possible to uncover the basis for a realistic definition of family useful for the purposes of public policy development.

The functions of families may be described in a variety of ways and combinations. Zimmerman's typology is useful from a policy point of view because it includes the significant benefits that ideally accrue to both individuals and to society by virtue of a family's performance of its functions:

> physical maintenance and care of family members;
>
> addition of new members through procreation or adoption and their relinquishment when mature;
>
> socialization of children for adult roles, such as those of spouse, parent, worker, neighbour, voter, and community member;
>
> social control of members, which refers to the maintenance of order within the family and groups external to it;
>
> production and consumption of goods and services needed to support and maintain the family unit; and,
>
> maintenance of family morale and motivation to ensure task performance both within the family and in other social groups. [5]

Families are supported and/or constrained in the performance of their functional tasks of care, education, control, economic maintenance and nurturance by a large variety of public policies. There are, most obviously, those policies and programs that are explicitly intended to influence the capacities of families to fulfil these responsibilities or the ways in which they do so. Included in this category would be such policies and programs as: child- and family-oriented income support programs and taxation policies; family life education programs; pre-natal nutrition and counselling programs; subsidized housing programs for low-income and/or lone-parent families; family recreation programs; broadly-defined employee assistance programs; a wide range of family counselling programs; laws and regulations pertaining to contraceptive practices and sex education; and, last but not least, policies and programs of supplemental child care.

Equally important are those public policies and programs (as chosen and administered by governments, employers, churches, school boards, voluntary organizations, and so on) that influence, but unintentionally and/or indirectly, the capacity of

families to fulfil their family responsibilities. The list of policies and programs in this latter category is long indeed and includes such diverse examples as: employment policies and wage scales; labour force adjustment policies that stimulate the geographical mobility of workers; media regulations; student loan programs; neighbourhood and community design policies; delinquency and correctional policies and programs and so on and so forth. [6]

From the point of view of the policy-maker, the challenge of family matters and family change is two-fold. First, how can the policies and programs that exist across a broad array of public policy domains - health, income security, housing, social services, education and employment - be coordinated, monitored and assessed in terms of their impacts, singly and collectively, on the functioning of families and the patterns of continuity and change in Canadian family life? Second, how can we utilize those values that express the personal and societal significance of our primary relationships - our emotional commitments, our relationships of material interdependence and our patterns of familial interaction - as a normative guide to the assessment of policies and programs that are not explicitly designed to influence families but which do exert significant effects on their capacities and functioning?

The coordination and assessment of public policies affecting families either directly and intentionally or indirectly and unintentionally are prerequisites to the development of coherent public policies to enhance the quality of family life. The essential elements of such a family policy approach are:

> -assurances of adequate family income and material security through a combination of employment policies, tax provisions and cash transfers;
> -provision of a broad and well-integrated system of educational, physical and mental health promotive programs and remedial services;
> -implementation of appropriate mechanisms to monitor, assess and control the effects of all public policies on the functioning of families. [7]

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4. Robert Rice. American Family Policy: Content and Context. New York: Family Service Association of America, 1977, p. 106.

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7. See, for instance:

Aldous, Joan & Dumon, Wilfried, Eds. The Politics and Programs of Family Policy: United States and European Perspectives. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame and Leuven University Press, 1980.